

Boston Teachers Union signs sellout “side letter” to force teachers back into unsafe schools

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In what is being falsely promoted as a step in the right direction for students struggling with remote and hybrid learning, Boston has opened all 125 of its public school buildings, bringing back nearly 5,000 high-needs students in the first week of February. This is to be followed March 1 with the return of K–Grade 3 students, Grades 4–8 on March 15, and Grades 9–12 by March 29.

These criminal reopenings have been prepared for months—pushed by Governor Charlie Baker, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Boston Public Schools (BPS)—and carried out through sellout deals orchestrated by the Boston Teachers Union (BTU).

The BTU’s drive to force teachers back into unsafe schools comes in the context of growing resistance across the US and globally by educators to governments’ efforts to reopen schools and nonessential businesses, placing the lives of teachers, students and the community in danger as the pandemic rages and new variants of the virus spread. Teachers in Chicago returned to schools Thursday after a contract was rammed through by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) against large opposition by CTU members.

In Boston, the BTU signed a January 10 “Side Letter Concerning Reopening Schools and Returning Students to Schools When the COVID Positive Rate is 5% or Above.” The letter was signed by union President Jessica Tang, Mayor Marty Walsh and BPS Superintendent Brenda Cassellius. Its aim is to force teachers back into unsafe schools to teach all grade levels, regardless of the COVID positivity rate in Boston, which currently stands at 5.8 percent. The previously agreed-upon rate was 4 percent, which was then raised without explanation to 5 percent with the agreement of the BTU, the City of Boston and the BPS superintendent.

The “side letter” now states that “if the positivity rate for COVID-19 is above 10% [!] for two weeks BTU may request impact bargain [sic] regarding any impacts from the

COVID-19 positivity rate on BTU’s members’ terms and conditions of employment. ...” In other words, teachers must stay in schools while the BTU leaders may, if they choose, return to the bargaining table to raise demands for a return to remote teaching.

According to a BTU member bulletin February 2, teachers have “no right to opt to remain working remotely only. Members who are directed in despite their preference or necessity may choose to take a leave, according to all applicable policies”—in other words, by using their sick days or taking unpaid leave.

The BTU has signed deal after rotten deal in an effort to force teachers back into school buildings. A memorandum of agreement (MoA) signed in September allowed for the possibility of achieving “fresh air” classrooms by opening windows in school buildings at the start of winter. The MoA called for the transition to remote learning if the positivity rate went above 4 percent, but added the following loophole: “When the Boston Public Health Commission or other City or State authority determines that the district can reopen, BTU bargaining unit members will be expected to return to BPS Buildings.” In other words, the school district has been granted the power to reopen schools, regardless of the dangers to teachers and students.

In October, when positivity rates reached 4.1 percent in Boston, teachers called for the closing of schools until the rate dropped in accordance with what they thought was agreed upon in the MoA. The conflict was quickly brought to the courts, with BPS claiming, based on the MoA, that schools could stay open regardless of the positivity rate. The percentage was then raised to 5 percent and preparations began by the city, state, BPS and BTU to move forward with the reopenings.

By November 15, BTU President Tang was calling for the “safe” reopening of in-person teaching for high-needs students and claimed that unions have supported in-person learning all along.

“Thanks to BTU educators,” she said, “and the City of Boston, we have an opportunity now to work together with the Boston Public Schools and Superintendent [Brenda] Cassellius [who a month earlier was threatening teachers if they refused to teach in-person] to create a model of safer, high quality in-person learning for high-needs students that other districts may do well to follow as our nation grapples with the impact of COVID-19 on our school communities.”

An agreement materialized that day in a “Memorandum of agreement between Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union,” returning high-needs students to four schools. The MoA was aimed at convincing teachers, parents and students that they had won demands to make in-person learning safe. The BTU’s position is that “schools are safe,” that teachers “don’t decide when schools open” and that if teachers are directed to go into school buildings, they must report and risk their potential death and infection and that of loved ones or take a leave of absence.

This position is not unique to the BTU, but is common to unions around the country that are deeply embedded in the Democratic Party, the party of Wall Street and the financial oligarchy that has prioritized their profits in the pandemic leading to the deaths of more than 460,000 people.

Teachers’ unions across the country are on board with Joe Biden’s pledge to reopen most schools within the first 100 days of his presidency, against the will of teachers and concerned parents. According to an account by the *New York Times*, Randi Weingarten, president of the 1.7-million-member American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has spent countless hours speaking with local union leaders, mayors, the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to push for the reopening of the three-quarters of US school systems that remain fully or partially closed.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site’s* coverage of this global crisis.

In the days leading up to the sellout contract forcing Chicago teachers back to schoolrooms, Weingarten was on the phone with Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, the school chief executive and local union leaders trying to push through a rotten deal. Similar were the calls made by the AFT head to Boston Mayor Walsh and BTU President Tang with same objective—suppressing strike action and forcing teachers back to in-person learning.

These union and government leaders are fearful above all of the growing movement of educators in the US and internationally who are being galvanized in opposition to the ruling elite’s homicidal “herd immunity” to reopen schools

and nonessential businesses.

According to a teacher who attended the most recent BTU membership meeting, when a teacher asked whether a strike could be called if they were forced to return to schools, Tang’s response could be summed up as follows: “Well there aren’t many schools where teachers aren’t using flexible schedules agreed upon by school staff and principals ... and all schools have had the vents put in all classrooms...as well as PPE.” On the same day, teachers were sent a message from the district saying that all staff who have students coming into their building must report to work.

Tang’s tactics are similar to those used by Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey, who at a rushed all-membership meeting Sunday recited a laundry list of reasons not to strike, including “It’s a pandemic. It’s cold. This won’t be an easy strike. This would be a strike in which the board would be calling people to work remotely. So, we need you to know people could cross a picket line by going home and logging on to their computer.”

Educators’ rank-and-file safety committees are being built in school districts across the country to fight for the lives and safety of teachers, students, families and the community at large, in opposition to the corrupt, pro-capitalist unions.

Teachers in Boston and across New England should form their own rank-and-file committees, based on a socialist program to meet social needs, not private profit accumulation—outside of the control of the corporatist unions—to link with educators across the country and internationally to fight for the policies of life to end the pandemic, not death for the continuation of gains in the stock market.

To join a committee in your area, or for help forming one, contact the World Socialist Web Site at wsws.org/edsafety.



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